

## Life, Liberty and the Pursuit of Homelessness by Gonzalo Duran



Gonzalo Duran  
Native of the Bronx

My name is Gonzalo Duran. I going expecting to graduate in May 2014 from Fordham University. As the CEO of Devil Dog USA Incorporated, and an advocate for the Bronx and Veteran community only two years ago, my situation was awful, at best.

After a great 8 years of living and breathing like the United States Marine I was trained to be, which included one tour of deployment in Iraq, I was honorably discharged. When I arrived back home to the Bronx, I was immediately faced with unemployment, homelessness, legal issues, and the inability to seek higher education and without medical benefits from the Veterans Administration (VA)!

As a Marine we are taught to follow the rules and regulations. I followed and fully complied with the rules set forth by the VA but did not qualify for or was delayed in certain necessities anything. I also sought assistance from the civilian sector to no avail. I tried to find a balance of VA and Veteran's Service Organizations VSO's assistance and suffered by their with losses and gains. Unfortunately, it was more on the side of losses rather than gains. The saddest part to all of this is that I had full knowledge of all the programs and the transitional process but could not benefit from them. It took me a laborious and full solid year to situate myself and another year to bring me back to the caliber I am

at now.

With God's grace and a lot of trial and error to make it interesting and sometimes downright stupid, I decided to dedicate my time to serving my fellow Veterans. I've chosen to use what I have learned to help other Veterans to avoid the hard transitional period I went through. To illustrate for you, only one aspect of what I mean by 'hard transitional period' I will give you the following.

When I first came back home to the Bronx, I could not find an apartment, and, it would still be a few months before my educational benefits would go into effect. I was told my unemployment would take a few months, and then I was told there is at least two-year wait period for disability benefits from the VA. While all this was going on, I was living with my mother.

I also asked for and received a men's business suit from the Mayor's Office of Veterans Affairs (MOVA). I proceeded to a broker's office with a lump sum of money in hand, which came from my last paycheck from the United States Marine Corps (USMC) with an 'I don't take no for an answer' attitude, and I was fortunate enough to finally have found good solid citizens who just wanted a good tenant. This is how I was able to build a foundation to start my new life despite so many obstacles

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in front of me. What I soon learned however, was that my case was NOT one-in-a-million!

Since that time of my life, I have found countless Veterans who faced the same hurdles but for much longer periods of time. I therefore devote much of my time to helping those individuals that are faced with the dilemma that "everyone and everything is against me" and then there are those who just seem to accept things as they are as in the case of Yegor Zubarev.

I recently met Yegor Zubarev in one of the classes at Fordham. He always seemed positive and highly energetic. He approached me one day after class when he saw one of my Facebook posts. We discussed the on-going projects in which I am involved and explained to him what Devil Dog is all about. We parted ways after our conversation but there was a sense of mutual respect and foresight of a future collaboration between us.

A few weeks went by and we began discussing how Yegor could help within Devil Dog since it is expanding. However, there were certain tell-tale signs I recognized from past experiences with him during our discussions that could not be ignored so my questions that were posed to him were as both a friend and a client.

Yegor related his story as to how he came to the United States from Russia and joined the USMC to better himself, and how he excelled in the service and became a citizen for it! And then he began to talk about the horrible effects of his honorable discharge. He took all the steps he was informed of for the purpose of the transition into civilian life, but the cracks in the issues as explained previously, caused him to end up at his present status.

Yegor Zubarev is currently a Fordham University student with ambitions of Law School. He is currently living in a shelter and faces many obstacles, similar to mine. Since that night my time has been devoted to pull him through any tragic event that he meets with and in return, he has selflessly given his time to helping others before him, by helping me and, now, I will show him what his efforts will bear.

What the VA and VSO's couldn't do in 1 year, I did over the weekend. All I had to do was knock on a few doors, tell them Yegor was a Fordham student, had the money and was a VETERAN. That alone sealed the deal.

I saw a quality in him that I see in myself and other members of the Armed Forces of the United States of America. We have a willingness to serve and persevere through any hardship.

So the question remains open to all, especially our elected officials: If one man like myself, who can teach another man how to fish instead of feeding him the fish after coming back home after serving his or her country proudly, why are there so many Veterans

homeless? Which by the way, the definition of the word "homeless" is too narrow and needs to be addressed.

Housing, on the other hand, is a universal issue but those who provide the very blanket for which our nation freedom is built upon, should not have to suffer so horrifically. Veterans should not have to be turned away for help on the services they are well-deserved of receiving.

Veterans returning home are seen as "unreliable" when it come for housing from brokers, landlords and real estate agents.

To be considered for help, a Veteran must be homeless for 1 year period, supervised. If we seek any comfort for the time period, we start all over.

There is more to the story and there is more to the devil that is in the details that you must know.

The VA needs a lot of money to do what it does for just one person, which is not a hell of a whole lot. Why can't the VA do what I do? Is it because they can't or don't know how to? Or is it that they are unwilling to work in a unified effort of brotherhood for ones' brothers and sisters who served proudly in the Armed Forces of the United States of America?

And please, before you give money to an organization ask how they money is distributed to the Veterans. Do their rules and regulations make any sense? Ask the VA to seek out more organizations willing to actually provide immediate services instead of wasting money on programs that offer all the same programs another one does.

There is no simple solution to this problem and it's a large task and all we can do is to fill in the gaps, so that instead of 4/5 Veterans suffer, 1/5 do and then we can all aim together for that last 20%.

I'd like to hear what you have to say about the shameful way those who protect YOU and your freedoms, are treated. You can read more at about Red Devil at [www.RedDevilUSAinc.org](http://www.RedDevilUSAinc.org). And for a way to maintain statistics on the emails I receive, a special email is being provided courtesy of DeWitt Clinton Express and all emails will be forwarded to me for an answer and one or two may be published in the upcoming issue of the newspaper. The email address is [DevilDogVets@DeWittClintonExpress.com](mailto:DevilDogVets@DeWittClintonExpress.com)

***You showed us how much you love your country, now let us show you how much your country loves you - Gonzalo Duran.***